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Urban mine warfare

A lethal problem requires multiservice input, joint solution

By John G. Roos

If U.S. ground forces are ordered to "take" Baghdad, and if a large number of Iraqi forces can't be dissuaded from putting up a last-ditch defense within the city, the resulting encounter is likely to be reminiscent of the final phase of World War II fighting in Europe.

The operation will fall primarily to Army infantrymen and Marines, no doubt with some very capable assistance from special operations forces. This force will find itself fighting much as its predecessors did during WWII — house to house, block by block.

But within several years, Pentagon war-planners expect to have in place a joint force that's capable of focusing the formidable, diverse capabilities of all the military services against an enemy force entrenched in a city. Just as the concept of "Combat in Built-up Areas" was abandoned in favor of "Military Operations in Urban Terrain," MOUT is now giving way to a new operational concept: "Joint Urban Operations." Techniques such as "nodal isolation," "soft-point capture and expansion" and "segment and capture" describe how future joint-force commanders will be expected to prevail over enemy forces during urban encounters.

Two considerations figure prominently in the war-fighting techniques of the future Joint Urban Operations concept. One aims at limiting collateral damage and casualties among non-combatants; the other capitalizes on the tremendous tactical, technological, informational and other advantages U.S. forces wield against adversaries.

Yet no matter what those advantages may be, the job of seizing urban terrain will remain fraught with danger. Not least among the enduring threats: mines and booby traps.

While technological advances are expected to greatly reduce the threat posed by command-detonated devices (countermeasures are expected to include radio-frequency-sweeping and signals-broadcasting systems) during future conflicts, there's not much that can be done now to remotely neutralize a grenade or some other low-tech explosive device attached to a tripwire.

Although this shortcoming is widely recognized, little has been done about it. That's why U.S. forces re-learned some deadly lessons from World War II and Korea during action in Vietnam.

In 1969, in the I Corps area, "surprise firing devices" accounted for 85 percent of ca-

sualties among Marines. Mines and booby traps may be low-tech devices, but add a bit of ingenuity and they can be used in seemingly endless ways. Simply by changing their fuzes, they present an opponent with an entirely new threat — one that probably didn't even enter the mind of the device's original designer. Combine a mine of older design with some type of new, miniaturized activating device, and a whole new threat is created.

Under current military doctrine, countermine responsibility rests with the Army Engineer Corps. But this branch of the Army never has been adequately funded for the mission.

As long ago as 1983, when the last known mission area analysis of mine countermeasures was conducted, the problem was recognized as the No. 1 shortcoming of the engineer branch. Twenty years and a major conflict later, the Army still lacks all but a rudimentary countermine capability.

The Army's abysmal record in addressing the countermine issue, coupled with the prospect of U.S. forces fighting their way through a mine- and booby trap-laced Baghdad, are why retired Maj. Gen. Carroll Childers has embarked on a one-man campaign aimed at reducing the threat posed by these devices. As this former commander of the Army National Guard's 29th Infantry Division (Light) sees it, U.S. forces need a Joint Counterforce (JCMF), organized for assignment or attachment to war-fighting combatant commanders as a joint-force capability, much as Special Operations Command is today.

The design of the JCMF, its employment doctrine and its equipment requirements could be developed either by the Army Training and Doctrine Command, under its Force Capabilities Team, or by the Joint Forces Command, under its Center for Joint Urban Operations.

If the idea of fielding a JCMF is found to have merit, or if it spawns a better idea for realistically attacking the countermine problem, the preferred approach could be refined by integrating it into the Defense Department's Joint Experimentation Campaign Plan.

The Joint Urban Operations concept is gathering momentum, but there's still plenty of time to use it to craft a coherent, joint-service strategy for conducting countermine operations in urban areas. This is one multiservice problem that demands a joint-service solution. ■

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